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ABSTRACT

Poetic writing involves thinking processes which are partially, and perhaps totally, different from the thinking processes involved in transactional writing and which are useful in learning across the entire range of organized knowledge, including the typical subjects in the school curriculum. This paper defines expressive, transactional, and poetic language and develops the theory that poetic and transactional writing, together, can provide individuals with a powerful range of life-long tools for learning. The paper lists nine hypotheses about the nature and uses of poetic thinking and presents and discusses in reference to these hypotheses a piece of writing by a 16-year-old girl. (JM)

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POETIC WRITING AND THINKING*

Robert P. Parker, Jr.

As teachers we would probably all agree that we want our students to learn how to think. Typically this means that we want them to master the process of abstracting, in systematic, step-by-step fashion, from certain 'concretely described facts' toward a generalization that seems justified both by the facts and by the logic of the steps. Susanne Langer calls this process 'generalizing abstraction.' The thinking involved in this process she calls 'discursive thinking.'

> Discursive thinking, once started, runs on in its own loosely syllogistic pattern from one proposition to another, actually or only potentially worded, but with prepared forms of conception always at hand. Where it seizes on any material - sensations, memories, fantasies, reflections - it puts its seal of fixity, categorical divisions, oppositions, exclusions, on every emerging idea, and automatically makes entities out of any elements that will take the stamp of denotative words.[1]

This process that Langer describes is what most teachers ~~over~~ have 'in mind' as the referent for the word 'thinking.' In practice, however, the word logic (or logical) so often substitutes for a more expanded definition like Langer's that it becomes inextricably bound to the word thinking, as if they were part of the same noun, the same phenomenon, and not separate words with separate referents. Thus our language itself becomes part of a conditioning process. If we can only think of thinking as logical, then we cannot conceive of other possible kinds of thinking which would employ other adjectives that have other

*An earlier and briefer version of this paper appeared in a publication of the 'Writing Across the Curriculum' Project, Writing in Humanities (London: Schools Council/University of London, Institute of Education, 1975).

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referents as descriptors.

Many of my colleagues in education play a similar game with the word research, especially those who fancy themselves as 'scientists.' They use the word rigorous only in conjunction with experimental research. Because we tend to accept rigor as a necessary characteristic of 'good' research, we are led by implication to think of experimental research as the only true or good or valid kind of research. This attitude is passed on to students and here, as with the fusion of logic(al) and thinking, we have fostered another generation of victims of that disease of academia that Meyer Abrams called 'hardening of the categories.'

Susanne Langer notes also that

> the sort of abstraction . . . which artists mean when they use the word approvingly is of a different sort, and its procedures have never yet received any systematic study. Pointing out that they are not based on generalization and are not carried on by discursive thought tells us only what they are not, but provides no notion of what they are.[2]

The processes by which artists reach abstractions, she says, are not logical. In fact, logic - discursive thinking - is "not only foreign to art, but inimical as well." As a "counterpart" to the generalizing abstractions reached through logical processes she suggests the term presentational abstraction. By implication, then, there is also something called presentational thinking which is distinct from discursive thinking.

Of presentational abstraction she says the following:

> Presentational abstraction is harder to achieve than the generalizing form familiar to scientists and recognized by epistemologists. It has no

> technical formula which carries the entire pattern from one level of abstractness to another, as progressive generalizations of propositions does when it is exercised simultaneously on all the terms or all the constituent relations of a given order in a system. It has, in fact, no series of successive levels of abstractness to be reached by all elements in the complex of a symbolic projection at the same time. For purposes of logical analysis, art is unsystematic. It involves an interplay of formulative, abstractive and projective acts based on a disconcerting variety of principles.[3]

Drawing on Langer's categories of generalizing and presentational abstraction, and on Sapir's notion of expressive language, James Britton has formulated a theory of language functions. His three principal functions are the expressive (from Sapir), the transactional (from Langer's generalizing abstraction), and the poetic (from Langer's presentational abstraction).

The expressive function encompasses much, if not most, of our spoken language and some of our written language. Expressive speech, "being more or less intimate, unrehearsed," is language "close to the speaker." It tends to follow and to project the immediate contours of the speaker's consciousness. What is on his mind is "freely verbalized," and "as he presents his view of things . . . so he also presents himself."[4] Thus, expressive speech provides the means by which people get to know each other; it is the primary fabric of social intercourse.

In expressive writing

> it is taken for granted that the writer himself is of interest to the reader; he feels free to jump from facts to speculations to personal anecdote to emotional outburst and none of it will be taken down and used against him - it is all part of being a person <u>vis a vis</u> another person.[5]

Besides this social function, expressive language carries a second, equally important, heuristic function. In expressive language we "are likely to rehearse the growing points of our formulation and analysis of experience." Because we can count on a sympathetic and attentive listener or reader, we feel free to begin tentative explorations of the new, our thoughts half-uttered, our attitudes half-expressed, the rest being left to be picked up by a listener or reader who is willing to take the unexpressed on trust."[6]

As we develop, and as the demands made on us by our various audiences become more stringent and more particular, Britton theorizes that our language - especially our written language - tends to move out from the expressive in two directions. On the one wing it moves toward the transactional and on the other, toward the poetic.

Transactional ←--------- Expressive ---------→ Poetic

Transactional language is the language we use to get things done in the world. Transactional utterances, spoken or written, are immediate means to ends outside themselves, and, as such, the form a transactional utterance takes,

> the way it is organized, is dictated primarily by the desire to achieve that end efficiently . . . Attention to the forms of the language is incidental to understanding, and will often be minimal.[7]

Because of this instrumental orientation, transactional language is "the typical language of science, of intellectual inquiry, of technology, of trade, of planning, reporting, instructing, inform-

ing, advising, persuading, arguing, and theorizing - and, of course, the language most used in school writing."[8]

When we speak or write transactionally, our audience takes it for granted that we mean what we say and that what we say can be "challenged for its truthfulness to public knowledge," for the power of its generalizing abstraction. Logic, evidence, previous authority - the nature of the discursive thinking and not the person who is speaking - are the criteria by which transactional speech or writing are judged, and the listener or reader is "at liberty to contextualize what he finds relevant" or believable, accepting parts of the whole and rejecting others.

Language moving from the expressive to the poetic has just the opposite function. A poetic utterance, spoken or written, <u>is</u> an "immediate end in itself . . . i.e. a verbal artifact, a construct." The way the parts are arranged and the way the forms of language are handled - the internal organization of the utterance - form "an inseparable part of the meaning of the piece."[9]

Because form and language are integral to meaning (or import), the audience is not free to contextualize a poetic utterance in piecemeal fashion, accepting some parts and rejecting others. The piece, rather, calls for what Britton calls "global contextualization: taking in the piece as a whole "virtually" as the writer (or speaker) created it or not, having <u>an experience of the piece</u> or not. In fact,

> it is taken for granted that true or false is not a relevant question at the literal level. What is presented may or may not in fact be a representation of actual reality but the writer takes it for granted that his reader will experience what is presented

> rather in the way he experiences his memories, and not use it as a guide book or map in his dealings with the world - that is to say, the language is not being used instrumentally as a means of achieving something else . . .[10]

It is this, i.e. written language in the poetic function, that I am referring to with the term poetic writing, and not a particular form of genre or category.

The results of the five-year study, The Development of Writing Abilities 11-18, indicate that as students move up in the secondary school they do more transactional writing and less poetic writing.[11] In the sample of 2000 pieces of writing, taken from 65 secondary schools, 54% of the writing done by first year students was transactional and 17% poetic (stories, poems, plays). By the seventh year 84% of the writing was transactional and 7% poetic.[12] Although it is risky to generalize these findings to other British or American secondary schools, it does seem reasonable to say that, with the exception of "Religious Education" in British schools, English is the only subject in which poetic writing is widely accepted as a legitimate and important activity. Few teachers of social studies, for example, would argue that writing stories and poems is central to learning social studies or being a social scientist, and the same I think is true for other "content" subjects.

In fact, if one were to confront most teachers of history or social studies or science with the argument that poetic writing is essential for learning or practising their subject, they would probably think he was crazy. Most teachers of these subjects

simply wouldn't think about it at all. Those who might want to would have great difficulty, not because they are closed-minded or stupid, but because the implicit view of their subject which they have internalized from their training excludes all considerations to this effect. There would be no 'compatible connections' (Bruner's phrase) between such ideas about poetic writing and their ideas about how their subject is taught and learned.

The case for English (and R.E.) is really not as different as it seems. Although teachers of these subjects often value poetic writing (i.e. 'creative' writing), the justification given for doing it is usually phrased in terms of the benefits to individual self-expression or the appreciation of the beauty and power of language. Like most other teachers, they seldom see poetic writing as central either to thinking about their subject or to the development of thought in general.

Despite the wide acceptance of this rationalistic bias, I am convinced that poetic writing involves thinking processes - mental operations - which are at least partially, and perhaps even totally, different from the thinking processes involved in transactional writing. I am also convinced that these thinking processes are not relevant solely to English or the arts or the humanities, but are useful in learning across the entire range of organized knowledge - including the typical subjects in the school curriculum. Poetic writing, like transactional writing, can make

a unique contribution to the overall mental development of individuals, as well as to their thinking about math or biology or history or whatever. Together poetic and transactional writing can provide individuals with a powerful range of life-long 'tools' for learning.

Even if we accept the long-standing notion that poetry involves intiution, feelings, imagination while discursive writing involves facts, analysis, logic, we still must confront the possibilities for learning attached to the operation of intuition and imagination in all aspects of education and life. It is an accident of fairly recent Western culture that analysis is valued over intuition and not, I think, something inherent in the nature of thinking itself. Even such a seemingly entrenched rational psychologist as Jerome Bruner is now arguing vigorously for attention in schools to the development of intuition as a primary tool of thought.

> . . . the aim of a balanced schooling is to enable the child to proceed intuitively when necessary and to analyze when appropriate.[13]

Bruner believes that intuition, or 'intuitional thinking' as he calls it, provides both the most powerful means of 'problem-finding' and of beginning the process of 'problem-solving.' In his terms we are more likely to sense a problem, have a hunch about how to get started solving it, and guess at shortcuts to the final solution intuitively than we are analytically. Analysis comes in when we gather more data to check what we have done, correct errors, and develop a coherent proof or theory to present the solution convincingly and economically. Thus intuition can be

'backstopped and disciplined by more rigorous techniques of problem-solving,' i.e., analysis.

My concern here is with what I take to be the unique features of poetic thinking, and what follows is a list of hypotheses about the nature and uses of poetic thinking. Admittedly they are crude and overlapping. Nonetheless, I hope they may be useful to researchers and teachers alike in shaping experiments and descriptive investigations.

1. The central activity in poetic writing, and therefore in poetic thinking, is metaphor-making: seeing and saying (and 'showing') those 'compatible connections' which we perceive to exist between various aspects of our experience. These metaphors are not 'merely decorative' in any sense. Rather, they provide the basic intellectual process by which man represents his experiences of the world, whether in images or in words, and recognizes the representations made by . . . other people.'[14]

2. Poetic writing necessitates the <u>combined functioning</u> of certain mental operations which tend to be separated in transactional writing. Operations like classifying, generalizing, speculating, theorizing tend to happen serially, linearly in transactional writing. The combinatory nature of metaphor forces a simultaneity of these functions.

3. Poetic writing tends to force words close to things (see Emerson) by demanding the creation of a 'real' context

for its events - a three-dimensionality - which the linearity and thrust toward logical abstraction of transactional writing casts off.

4. New information is made functional in poetic writing, put to use in making a construct for a purpose, and this functionalism is missing from much of school-sponsored transactional writing.

5. Poetic writing offers emphathic possibilities to the writer - living other roles, putting oneself in other peoples' shoes - and so extends the scope of the writer's sensibility and his grasp of human and natural history in ways that transactional writing does not.

6. Poetic writing encourages the interplay of first and second-hand experience in the construction of its artifacts. (Transactional writing tends to force those modes of experience apart, which creates the problem of which one pupils should use first and how they should be 'taught' to move from one to the other).

7. Poetic writing necessitates a transaction between the writer and his material which much of the extrinsically motivated 'report' writing in school subjects does not.

8. Because of its centering in feeling and valuing, and thus its inherent personal-ness as a mode of communication, poetic writing forces the writer to have a real concern with his audience. (It also permits the self to be an important audience).

9. Poetic writing engenders a more intense engagement with language and with the forms language takes. Thus moments occur in which the writer's unconscious is fused with his consciousness in a process which seems to take the art of writing out of his 'control.' (i.e. the muse or demon takes over.)

What follows here is a piece of writing by a 16-year old girl which I have commented on briefly in the light of some of my hypotheses. I only want to suggest how this might be done with a much larger sample of poetic writing drawn from subjects across the curriculum.

JO MY FIRST DAY IN THE WORKHOUSE.

So this was to be my new home. I looked at the hugh building in front of me. I once saw some army Barracks, and this new home of mine reminded me of them. All around me were big walls, and the gates were guarded. Why? Surely I wasn't going to be locked in? A feeling of nausea gripped at my stomach. Oh God, what have I done to have to live here? I knew the answer though. The reason I had been sent to this workhouse, was because I'm poor. Surely that isn't a crime?

'You boy, come here,' the bellowing voice shattered my thoughts,and I hurried over.

"Come with me, come on, I haven't got all day" he shouted.

"Where are we going? Who was this man? Oh, help me someone.

"Here!" he pointed to a wooden door.

"I turned the handle nervously. I peered inside and looked away immediately. The sight made me feel sick. Old women and children were crammed together in this filthy room. It was freezing cold and they were all huddled together, trying to keep warm. 'Oh God, surely I'm not to live here, with all these people.'

"Here, put this on," the man who had showed me the way in, thrust a drab pair of trousers and a shirt in my hands. I had to hand my clothes over to him.

"Right, bed," he shouted. Everyone moved quickly, hurrying past this man.

The dormitory where all of us kids had to sleep was filthy, as the other room. The beds were so close together, there was no room to walk around, or even change. Mice scurried around the room as we all tried to go to sleep on the hard wooden boards. Silly boy hadn't eaten that day, and I was freezing. I didn't sleep that night. The stench, hunger, cold and loneliness made me cry most of the night.

At about 6 a.m. the next morning the man, who I later learned was the ward master woke me up.

The stone floor was so cold, I thought my feet were about to drop off. We got dressed in our uniform, and went to a huge room called the Dining Room. We each had a bowl of gruel and a small

piece of bread. Nothing else.

"Move!" bellowed out the man. We quickly ran out of the room.

The next thing was school. I looked forward to this, as I'd always loved school when I lived at home. We marched down the road and into the school gates. I soon realised things would be different. I'd forgotten how we'd used to ignore 'those workhouse kids.' Forgotten how we'd laughed at them. Forgotten how we'd teased and jeered them. But I soon remembered. Oh yes! Now it was my turn. The taunts of my old friends was more than I could bear. I ran out of school, blindly down the road. I had to get out. They'd never take me back. I'd die if they locked me in that "prison" again.

I sat crying in this "punishment room." I should have known I couldn't escape. I had to spend one whole day locked in the 'punishment room', without food or water. There was no furniture in this room, although there was a tiny barred window I watched the men at work out of this. They had to do hard monotonous jobs, such as stone breaking, for road makking, or picking old rope to make oakum for caulking the flanks of ships.

At the end of the day, I was let out of this 'cell' and went to my 'bed.' I talked to some of my work mates. They told me about the workhouse. In one corner a boy coughed continuously. My mates told me he'd die in the night. Sure enough, the next morning he was dead. I was shocked, but everyone took this as a natural occurence. I awoke in the morning, after praying all

night, it was a nightmare, to the same neglected, dingy room, to face another day, which would set the pattern of my life, for the next 10 years.

The girl's description of this day is highly detailed. The workhouse is a 'huge' building with 'high walls,' like 'some Army Barracks' she had seen, and the 'gates' are 'guarded.' A bellowing voice shattered her thoughts. She 'turned the handle nervously.' The 'dormitory' was 'filthy' and 'mice scurried around the room.'

This careful depiction of the physical setting, the 'tone' of the place, and her feelings creates a 'real' context for presenting what she knows about workhouses that the logical demands of transactional writing do not permit. (See hypothesis 1). By actually 'feeling' herself present in this setting, and the experience of it, she developes and communicates an empathy with its inhabitants (See hypothesis 3).

> I'd forgotten how we used to tease 'those workhouse kids.' Forgotten how we'd laughed at them. Forgotten how we'd tease and jeered them. But I soon remembered. Oh yes! Now it was my turn. The taunts of my old friends was more than I could bear.

She is interacting intensely with her material, but to come to terms with the 'experience' for herself and to communicate her feelings - her sense of the degradation of people consigned to such a place - to others (See hypotheses 5, 8, and 2). Because of the intensity of her feelings, she moves her second-hand experience of workhouses gained from books or lectures (or

both) closer to first-hand experience - making it more a 'virtual' experience of workhouses than she has had before. (See hypothesis 4).

To sum up: She has put her information, her feelings, her perception, her memories to use in making a poetic construct - something 'artlike' which has value and meaning for her and perhaps for others. Thus information has been transformed into knowledge, perception into knowing, through her engagement in these mental processes - this thinking - which is unique to the poetic function in writing and the poetic mode of discourse. Certainly much of history or geography or classics or science requires these kinds of thinking for the fullest learning to occur. All students need to engage in this kind of thinking in all areas of their lives if they are to become full, creative, sympathetic human beings.

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FOOTNOTES

[1]Mind: An Essay on Human Feeling, Volume I (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1967), p. 155.

[2]Ibid., p. 154.

[3]Ibid., p. 156.

[4]"Whats' the Use? A Schematic Account of Language Functions," Educational Review (Fall 1971), pp. 207-8.

[5]Why Write? (London: Schools' Council/University of London Institute of Education, 1973), p. 11.

[6]Ibid.

[7]Britton, "What's the Use?," p. 212.

[8]Ibid., p. 12.

[9]Ibid., p. 213.

[10]Why Write? P. 13.

[11]James Britton et al. (London: Macmillan, 1975).

[12]First year students are 11, third year are 13, fifth year are 15, and seventh year are 17-18.

[13]The Relevance of Education (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1971), p. 73. American Publisher: W. W. Norton.

[14]James Britton, Language and Learning (London: Penguin Education, 1972).